

Habits of Mind Necessary to Live in a Democracy

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

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How do I maintain relationships with people who think so differently from me? That question, or a variation on it, is one of the most common questions I have been asked over the last five years.

It may pertain to people's relatives, longtime friends, or neighbors. Or it may be asked in a more sweeping way—pertaining to all "those people" who think differently than me or us.

I heard a speaker this summer who answered this question in a compelling and different way. Dr. Pamela Paresky, author, visiting professor at Johns Hopkins and University of Chicago, and Director of the Aspen Center for Human Development, was speaking at the Chautauqua Institution about her project, *Habits of a Free Mind*. The project includes "courses and programs that facilitate the ability to think in new ways and to lead and engage across lines of difference—without feeling traumatized and without dehumanizing ideological opponents."¹

Paresky's approach to the critical concern, *How do We talk Across Differences?* comes at the issue through the lens of marriage and what is needed for a successful marriage. It is an interesting and very human approach. As I listened to her and the concepts she teaches, it became clear to me that the skills she is talking about are needed for all relationships, including marriage, friendship, and being part of a congregation. And, as she says, these same habits of thinking are also necessary for a successful democracy.

Paresky starts by outlining basic human needs in relationship. In a relationship we all need to:

1. Be understood.
2. Trust that we'll be kept safe and won't be abandoned.
3. Feel appreciated and admired.
4. Have someone to defend you when you feel attacked.
5. Feel like we matter and belong.

¹ "About Us," Aspen Center for Human Development, accessed October 24, 2023, <https://www.aspen-centerforhumandevlopment.org/about-us.php>.

6. Navigate the tension between being responsible and being free.

We all seek to be understood, feel safe, appreciated, and even admired. We all want to know we will not be abandoned when we speak our truth, especially if our truth deviates from the prevailing thinking of the other person or people in the group. We all need to feel that we matter, and we belong. And we all need to find the balance in any relationship between meeting our own needs and meeting the needs of the other(s) in the relationship.

We need to be sensitive to these needs both within ourselves and others for a relationship to succeed, including as it pertains to a successful democracy.

Paresky argues, and I agree, that we need to trust that the people in the relationship share common goals; we just often have different visions of how to achieve them. This is true at church, in marriages, and in friendships. The problem today is that when it comes to democracy, most of us do not trust that those "on the other side" have the same goals as we do. Research shows, however, that we do share common goals.

I referenced this in my September "In the Spirit" column, in *The Daily News of Newburyport*, entitled, "Beyond Words."

The Associated Press reported this June on a study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago.

The study revealed that 90% of Americans share nine common values, regardless of their political party.

These include a government that is accountable to the people, fair and equal application of the rule of law, a government that represents the people it serves, learning from the past to improve our country, personal responsibility and accountability, and respect and compassion across differences. This is good news.

The problem is that 33% of respondents do not

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believe that the other party holds these common values. Trust is fearfully low. This is not going to change as long as we believe that the goal is to be "right."

Our trust in one another will increase when we understand the reality of our interconnectedness, accept what that means, and then choose to listen and learn, while focusing on our shared common values.

The answer is not to demonize the "other" or to convince them to change their beliefs. We don't have to agree or hold the same beliefs. Thinking so robs us of the gifts that arise out of our differences. This is about so much more than being right.²

Dr. Paresky outlines seven habits that help us to develop trust that the "other" side or person shares our goal, and ways of thinking that promote successful relationships and democracy.

These habits of the mind include a sense of calling, commitment, courage, curiosity, candor with consideration, compromise, and compassion, the opposite of contempt. Contempt, by the way, is the number one predictor of a failed relationship.

For each of the habits, Paresky suggests a mantra or thought that can help us strengthen the habit until, with repeated use, it becomes a virtue.

The first habit of thinking is being aware of a sense of calling, meaning something we feel inspired to do. Paresky says, "A calling is a question and how we live our lives is the answer."³

The mantra that goes with calling is, "You matter to me." In using this mantra, we remind ourselves when faced with difficult situations that our calling matters to us. "Why am I trying to work this out with Uncle Jimmy? Because family matters to me." "Why does it matter that I stay in relationship with longtime friends who

2 Rev. Rebecca M. Bryan, "Beyond Words," *The Daily News of Newburyport*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.frsuu.org/in-the-spirit-beyond-words-beyond-beliefs-we-are-interconnected/>.

3 Lecture from Chautauqua Institution, August 2023.

have different viewpoints than I do? Because democracy matters to me."

Commitment is the second habit. After making a decision to follow a call, we need to make a commitment to that calling. The mantra for commitment is, "How will we solve our problems together?" This can be a difficult one. In the face of perceived conflict, human instinct is to either fight, freeze, try to please, or leave. Honoring our commitment means we stay. (This assumes it is a safe relationship to be in.)

The next habit is courage, with the mantra, "You can count on me." It takes courage to show up, to have someone's back, and to support them in speaking their truth.

This leads to the habit of curiosity. Being curious requires us to listen, not just for what we want to hear, but for what the other person is actually saying. "Listening is a primitive act of love; listening is not debate," says Paresky.

Curiosity has two mantras. First, "What am I missing?" This requires us to put aside what we think we know and listen to the other or others. The second mantra for curiosity is, "What's the story I'm telling myself?" This mantra strengthens self-awareness and reflection, both essential for healthy relationships.

From curiosity, we move into candor with consideration. The ability to be honest without being unnecessarily harmful is an art, and it is one that many of us can do better. The mantra for candor with consideration is, "I choose my words with care." It reminds us that it is about principles over personality and that we can disagree without dehumanizing, attacking, or demonizing people.

The final two habits are compromise and compassion. The mantra for compromise is, "You can trust me." With compromise we are employing acts of repair, not retribution. This can cause us to feel vulnerable, as many of us want proof that the other person or persons are worthy of our trust.

The final habit is compassion, which is the opposite of contempt. Compassion's mantra is, "You belong here." "Here is a place for us. There

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is a place for them.”⁴

This commitment to radical inclusivity is what activist and minister Pauli Murray meant when she said, “When my brothers try to draw a circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them.”⁵

Paresky argues that these habits of thinking help loosen our attachment to tribal demands and focus instead on civil demands. She reminds us that tribal thinking leads to war and that no ideological monoculture will remain a democracy for long.

“There are ex-antisemites and ex-white supremacists...” she says, “...but it requires us to see others as human beings and not as monsters.” Do we have the willingness to be with a person who is wrong and see them as a person worthy of dignity and humanity? “The only thing that has changed hateful beliefs is when someone who was supposed to hate didn’t,” says Paresky.⁶

There is one additional thing required to develop habits of a free mind that I believe needs to be stated. That is proximity. If we are to have relationships with those who think differently than we do, we must be proximate to them. Brian Stevenson taught me this in his work with people on death row.

Proximity doesn’t need to mean you are lifelong friends or that you even have long-term relationships. It does, however, require genuine connection with others, when possible, on their landscape.

Some of you have commented on how deeply the war in the Middle East is affecting me. I am convinced this is because I spent time there in

4 Lecture from Chautauqua Institution, August 2023.

5 Jeremy Sierra, “Episcopal Saint: Remembering Pauli Murray’s Life and Work,” Trinity Church Wall Street, June 27, 2017, <https://trinitywallstreet.org/stories-news/episcopal-saint-remembering-pauli-mur-rays-life-and-work>.

6 Lecture from Chautauqua Institution, August 2023.

2014. This was a “dual narrative” experience, during which time we heard from both Israelis and Palestinians. We stayed with families in the Holy Land, including the West Bank. These people fed us and let us use their phones to call back home.

This war is close to me because I have been there. I know we can’t all do that, but there are things we can do—listen to tapes with civilians talking, read their words in books or online, listen to their music, look at pictures of the people—not on the nightly news, but when they are simply being people. When possible, get close, and closer still. It changes us.

I’ll close with what ended my newspaper column: “...the future is in our hands. The wellbeing and future of our children and grandchildren, animals, ecosystems, the planet, and all those who live on it depend on decisions we make today.”

May we choose habits that promote free thinking and sustain relationships. May we draw the circle wide, making room, so that we may once again believe in the power of the people.

Amen.